



Photo illustration of a man in handcuffs (Photo: Jeremy Long)

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SINGAPORE: A teenage boy from a broken family hates going home. His parents are divorced. Lacking an adult figure at home, he would rather spend his time smoking with his friends.

He is typical of an at-risk youth which social workers from Care Corner look out for in the hope of preventing them from going down the wrong path.

ADVERTISING

A "We have enough experience to know where to find them - at parks, void decks, rooftop carparks," said Mr Martin Chok, assistant director of youth services at Care Corner.

It took six months before the teenager confided in the social worker befriender about problems he has at home.

The social worker also got him to use his free time more meaningfully by arranging for him to work part-time at a food and beverage chain, keeping him out of trouble.

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The programme by Care Corner is one of many early intervention programmes rolled out in recent years, and Mr Chok believes they have contributed to a drop in the number of youth offenders arrested.

At a dialogue on youth delinquency and offending on Monday (Sep 9), Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee said the number of youths arrested has dropped about 13 per cent, from about 3,100 in 2014 to about 2,700 last year.

Sociologist at the National University of Singapore Tan Ern Ser told CNA that if the decline is the beginning of a trend, then there is "cause for celebration and optimism about the future".

"Given that most people in society are generally law abiding, a drop by 13 per cent is both socially and statistically significant," he said.

MORE COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS, SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES

The Government recognised the need for a coordinated effort in handling youth offenders. Last year it [set up the National Committee on Prevention, Rehabilitation and Recidivism \(NCPR\)](/news/singapore/committee-to-better-support-youth-offenders-to-be-set-up-desmond-9828688), (</news/singapore/committee-to-better-support-youth-offenders-to-be-set-up-desmond-9828688>) which involves agencies like MSF, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the

► **[READ: Committee to better support youth offenders to be set up: Desmond Lee \(/news/singapore/committee-to-better-support-youth-offenders-to-be-set-up-desmond-9828688?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna\)](/news/singapore/committee-to-better-support-youth-offenders-to-be-set-up-desmond-9828688?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna)**

Mr Chok said that such efforts to bring different agencies together has led to more formal coordination between schools and social service agencies in recent years, more so than in the past. This could have played a part in the improved situation, he said.

H gave the example of a scheme where schools are paired up with social service agencies in their proximity. When there is an issue with a student, the school knows who exactly to contact, and the school and organisation coordinate in order to provide support for the student.

“In the past, if there was a problem, the school could go to any agency that offers a youth programme, so it was more on an ad-hoc basis,” he said.

Mr Alfred Tan, chief executive of the Singapore Children’s Society, which works with young persons, said that in the past few years, also noted that there has been a greater emphasis on structured programmes for early intervention.

The society has been running a programme since 1994 that allows students to go to centres set up in classrooms after school, if they have nowhere else to go, Mr Tan said.

In recent years, the programme was tweaked from just a space to hang out with games and activities to one where social workers are more involved in getting to know the students, and intervening where needed.

They also teach these students life skills, which at the age of 13 and 14, they may not have acquired, Mr Tan said. These teach them how to cope with challenges, he added.

Chief Executive Officer of NuLife Care and Counselling Services Sheena Jebal said that previously, schools preferred to have their counsellors, pastoral and guidance care teachers to manage their students with problems.

“But in recent years, schools are more open to collaborating and working with social service agencies for the common good of the student,” she said.

Among the programmes in place are those that seek to address the problem of long-term absenteeism from school.

Mr Chok said that when it comes to these students, who may not have attended school for months, social workers have to be creative and persistent.

“We have to remember that the school can’t get through to them, and they probably didn’t have a positive school experience. They are ready to be defiant, so we have to come in on more neutral ground,” he said.

A MORE FORGIVING SOCIETY

In his speech on Monday, Mr Lee highlighted the importance of early intervention and the need for second chances.

“Youth-at-risk and young offenders often face challenging circumstances. They may lack family support, or mix with the wrong company. Some of this is beyond their control, but has a big impact as they are growing up,” he said.

"By providing as much help as we can upstream, we want to help our young people to form good patterns, habits and behaviours, to break the cycle of abuse or offending and achieve their fullest potential," added the minister.

Proposed [amendments to the Children and Young Persons Act \(/news/singapore/strengthened-support-for-abused-and-neglected-children-proposed-11781234\)](/news/singapore/strengthened-support-for-abused-and-neglected-children-proposed-11781234) include extending rehabilitation to youth offenders up to below 18 years old. The current Act limits this age to 16. With the changes, youth offenders will be allowed to declare that they do not have a criminal record if they successfully complete Youth Court orders.

"In recent years, social policies have metamorphosed to take on a softer and empathetic approach towards youths," she said.

She added that the system recognises that there could be a lot of things happening in a youth's life that predisposes them to commit offences in "moments of susceptibility". There is also increasing importance paid to their emotional health that is affected in the process, she said.

"There is a lot more effort being made by the relevant ministries and agencies to tackle the root cause of their offences, to be less harsh on them, and to present them with several avenues to mend their ways," she added.

Source: CNA/ja

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